importance of studying and preserving vernacular architecture.

Given the increased importance of the Web and the challenges of maintaining professional organizations, VAF's website may one day shift from being a passive overview of the organization to an active communications tool. Architecture naturally lends itself to visual forms of communication, so more drawings and photographs would greatly enhance the site. Furthermore, while awards for preservation and scholarship should certainly be encouraged, devoting so much space to the organization's awards program suggests that the "award winning" topics are all that matter.

The VAF is a great organization, and the website is a good beginning. It will be interesting to see how it is developed in the future.

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1. Thomas Carter and Elizabeth Collins Cromley, *Invitation to Vernacular Architecture: A Guide to the Study of Ordinary Buildings and Landscapes* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005).

The National Archives and Records Administration
http://www.archives.gov/

United States National Archives and Records Administration; accessed September 2, 2005

As archivists continue to embrace the digital revolution by employing electronic methods of document preservation, organization, and presentation, researchers proficient in traditional cataloging methods must master new technologies in order to access the past. The United States National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) website offers historians, archeologists, and others interested in heritage and heritage stewardship a starting point in understanding the advantages—and limitations—of Internet research.

First launched in 1996 and redesigned in 2005, the NARA website is federally funded and produced by the staff of the National Archives Policy and Communications Division. Charged with advancing the mission of the National Archives, the website serves the broad interests of an increasingly Internet-literate public, from genealogists and veterans to records managers and cultural resource professionals.

The NARA website includes resources relating to the nation's administrative, legislative, and cultural history, as well as more than 30 online exhibits that chart significant events and themes in U.S. history through documents, images, and photographs. It also features a series of lesson plans, "Teaching with Documents," demonstrating how primary sources might be used creatively in the classroom.

While the purpose of the NARA website is to offer tools and guides to help researchers at all levels locate documents in the archives, most professionals will find that searching, locating, and viewing digitized NARA records is no substitute for visiting one of NARA's regional branches or its two main depositories in Washington, DC, and College Park, Maryland.

Those unfamiliar with the National Archives and its collections, however, will find the NARA website especially helpful. Besides explaining the mission of the National Archives as the official depository for federal records, the website presents hundreds of online texts and finding aids describing the various types of government documents and their purposes and functions.

The NARA website also allows visitors to navigate through millions of records without first having to master the complicated system of how these records are arranged. In effect, two processes

(uncovering the organizational principles behind the archives and then identifying research material) have become one. Visitors can now access several online catalogs and search the archives by keyword, subject, or series, thereby allowing researchers to locate useful documents while simultaneously learning how the records are filed and arranged.

The Archival Research Catalog (ARC) is a good starting point for those interested in historic preservation or cultural resources. Containing descriptions of about 40 percent of NARA's holdings, ARC allows users to search thousands of digitized historical photographs, documents, and images by keyword, provenance, or record type. In its search results, however, ARC demonstrates the benefits and shortcomings of online research. While a keyword search might yield several records containing valuable information, any ARC search is bound to leave the researcher wondering about the remaining 60 percent of National Archives holdings that are, at present, unsearchable online. At best, ARC offers the serious researcher only a *sense* of what the National Archives contains and whether it is worth conducting a more exhaustive search in person.

By comparison, the Access to Archival Databases (AAD) contains information on more than 50 million electronic records and often provides research links to catalogs on other research-oriented websites containing digitized images. For example, a researcher interested in a particular historic structure or a collection of buildings in a specific region might use AAD to explore sites recorded by the National Park Service's Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). Beginning with holdings in the National Archives, such a search would lead to the Library of Congress's American Memory website (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/), where a more extensive collection of online photos and documents is available. If the NARA website offers anything to researchers that was not available before, it is this linking among websites that provides tremendous potential for locating, evaluating, and interpreting widely-dispersed records.

Two additional research services, the Microfilm Publications Catalog and the Archives Library Information Center (ALIC), allow users to browse microfilm and book holdings, as well as NARA's special collections and periodicals. Besides helping researchers locate specific information, the services offer those researchers who are unable to visit the National Archives the option of purchasing items online or emailing an ALIC librarian for assistance in obtaining copies. The NARA website also provides information on how to hire independent researchers who might be able to locate and photocopy specific documents.

The NARA website offers researchers new ways of locating and connecting archival material that bridge time and distance. For those with limited resources, a thorough exploration of NARA's online catalogs will increase the efficiency and productiveness of a future visit to the Archives and perhaps inspire the researcher to follow other fruitful avenues of inquiry.

However, the website's developers anticipated the greatest limitation to the NARA website in explaining that, because of the prohibitive cost of digitizing material, only a small percentage of National Archives records is available online. Thus, despite its thoughtful presentation and well-organized content for the everyday user, the NARA website leaves the professional researcher wanting more than what NARA has placed within his or her virtual grasp—more images, more documents, more substance.

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CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship

Volume 3 Number 1 Winter 2006

CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship
Winter 2006
ISSN 1068-4999

CRM = cultural resource management

CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship is published twice each year by the National Park Service to address the history and development of and trends and emerging issues in cultural resource management in the United States and abroad. Its purpose is to broaden the intellectual foundation of the management of cultural resources.

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CRM Journal is produced under a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers.

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